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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the process by which the results of research and evaluation studies are utilized in the formation of educational policy is the purpose of this paper. Based on a case study of a large urban public school's implementation of a dress code policy, four interrelated factors are identified that affect policy formation and data utilization: (1) policymakers' "mind frames"; (2) public demands over public needs; (3) positive public perception of policy; and (4) impact of mass media. The findings indicate that research and evaluation data utilization in the policy formation process is an unfulfilled promise that contributes to "education reform fads." Failure by policymakers and researchers to reverse the trend of inappropriate use of research results will perpetuate the lag between educational improvement and the rhetoric of excellence in reform movements. (17 references) (LMI)

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Abstract

An Evaluator Ponders: What Motivates Policymakers?

This paper attempts to provide insight into the issues/factors associated with educational policy development relative to research/evaluation utilization. On the basis of a case study of a large urban public school's implementation of a voluntary school uniform policy, i.e., dress code, this study's implications and contribution to the policy literature suggests four interrelated factors associated with policy formulation and data use:

(1) "Policymakers' mind frames"

(2) "Public wants over public needs"

(3) Positive public perception of policy

(4) Impact of the mass media's reporting

The conclusion drawn from this study suggests that research and evaluation data utilization in the policy formulation process is a promise unfulfilled which contributes to "educational reform fads." Until policymakers and we - as potential policymakers reverse the trend of (inappropriate) lack of use concerning research and evaluation results, improvements in education will continue to lag behind the rhetoric of excellence in reforms.

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An Evaluator Ponders: What Motivates Policymakers?

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For a little more than ten (10) years I have worked in a major urban public School District's Office of Research, Evaluation and Planning. Presently the office is known as the Office of Assessment. It is one of the largest research and evaluation offices in the country with approximately 70-80 professional/technical staff. Most of the office staff (95%-98%) have worked in the office for 15 years or longer. The school district that employs such a large research and evaluation staff is comprised of approximately 200,000 students.

About a year ago one of my colleagues, who was responsible for coordinating the office evaluation projects, came rushing into my office. He was breathing heavily, nearly out of breath. At the time, I was concerned for his health since he is an older gentleman with more than 35 years of experience working for the school district. (He recently retired.) My concern for his health was short-lived as his voice indicated to me the reason for his excitement and state of unusual euphoria. My colleague stated to me: "Stop everything you're doing! You must complete the evaluation of the school uniform code. The Board and Superintendent (the decision-making and policy-setting body of the school system) want to look at the data and develop a systemwide policy on students' dress codes."

This paper is the result of an evaluation study and presentation at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, April 20, 1990. The views expressed in this paper are the author's own, and do not reflect the policy or position of the School District of Philadelphia.

This was not the first time that I had been requested to meet an unreasonable deadline in a reasonable and responsible manner. However, unlike the many previous instances when I had been told, "We need the study, as soon as possible;" only to complete a project and see it shelved or not looked at for weeks/months, this time I sensed a genuine interest and commitment to utilizing the evaluation data. Accordingly, I geared-up and worked tirelessly to appropriately complete the study on school uniforms.

The focus of this paper is not on a school district's dress code policy. Instead, it is about how research and evaluation data results are utilized in the formulation of educational policy. This case study does not attempt to suggest a generalizable perspective on policy and data utilization. It does, however, purport to document what Schon (1983) has labeled "an exemplary case," that when synthesized along with other "family-resembling cases/studies" may provide insight into the issue of educational policy and the function of research/evaluation studies/data. Thus, perhaps this and other such case analyses will collectively lead to a generalizable perspective in the area of policy studies.

In this paper there will be a brief discussion of the evaluation study and data that were used by the policymaking body to develop a policy on students' dress. Second, there will be a perspective on research and evaluation data utilization relative to policy formulation. This latter perspective will rely on the research literature in this area in order to seek a rationale for the data utilization. The necessity for seeking a reason why the evaluation study findings were used by the

policymakers is critical, because in my ten years as a program evaluator the use of data to formulate policy is more an anomaly than it is a rule or regular occurrence. In my years of experience in the research office I have written numerous reports and research evaluation studies. Some have been published in journals, and many have appeared in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Oftentimes I have written what I considered meaningful studies with policy implications for such significant areas as school desegregation and effective school practices. Yet, none of my "significant" research and evaluation studies have made it to the policy development level. Why?

I now understand why my colleague who had worked in the system for nearly forty years came rushing into my office to request that I complete the school uniform study. I have come to reflect on the fact that he was correct when he stated in excitement and unusual enthusiasm, "This is a rare opportunity to have your evaluation data used in the development of policy."

This paper will conclude with a perspective on the implication of this case analysis based on how (and why) the evaluation data were used in the educational policy formulation process.

The Study

The school district evaluation study that was conducted addressed the issue of school uniforms, i.e., students' attire. The evaluation focused on one elementary school that initiated the dress code.

Recently, the print and visual media have highlighted the significance that high school and junior high school students have attached to clothes, e.g., the $400-$500 designer jackets, and the $100-$150 sneakers which have resulted in teen robberies as well as killings. As horrifying as it may be to face the fact that young people have killed others to possess an item of clothing or footwear, it is equally as mystifying (to me) that young people spend such large sums of money on these type items, with the endorsement or acquiescence of their parent(s).

At the elementary school in which a dress code was first established in this large urban public school district, parents, teachers and students apparently felt that clothing competition was serious enough to merit action.

On the basis of the evaluation study that was conducted, after research on the topic of public school dress codes, the findings were documented in an official school district report (Pugh, 1989).

The evaluation findings showed that 91% of the parents of students attending the elementary school indicated that the dress code enhanced the school's image. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the responding parents agreed with the policy, and they felt it was a good policy because it lessened competition and peer pressure to dress a certain way. (Eighty-one percent of the parents felt the dress code would save them money on clothes shopping.)

The overwhelming majority of teachers who were surveyed at the pilot site school felt that the students were proud to wear the school colors, and the policy de-emphasized student dress competition.

There seemed to be an implicit assumption, particularly among adults - teachers, parents, and policymakers, that the wearing of school uniforms would contribute to an improved school climate. While testing the validity of such a perspective is difficult, students (51%) who responded to the evaluation indicated that wearing a school uniform did not affect their behavior. Based on follow-up interviews conducted by the school principal, it was further determined that the students generally believed that they "already behaved well in school;" therefore, wearing a school uniform had no impact on their behavior.

Apparently, young people see the world quite differently than adults, and more attention to students' perspectives may make educational policy development more effective.

The Board of Education as the policymaking body of the school district utilized the data results to develop a districtwide school uniform policy. Presently, 14 additional elementary schools throughout the system have implemented the policy and many more are considering it. The requirements of the policy are that it be voluntary, it must be initiated by parents and endorsed by 80% of the 51% or more who respond to a survey, and provisions must be made for students who desire uniforms, but cannot afford them, to be provided uniforms.

On the day that the Board voted unanimously to adopt the policy, I arrived at the boardroom to present the evaluation data results. At the time of my arrival, I was greeted by numerous smiles and pleasantries. Perplexed by the continual smiles that I received, along with the compliments on my attire, I wondered if something was wrong. Individuals were constantly telling me how nice I looked. Well, wearing a yellow, blue dotted bow tie, blue blazer, yellow shirt and blue pants seemed normal to me. Yet, I asked myself, "Why all the continual smiles and mention of how well I looked?"

Prior to going before the Board and Superintendent to present the study, along with a school principal, a parent and her daughter who was dressed beautifully in the school colors, the principal whispered to me, "You really look nice in our school colors!"

Then, I understood the smiles. I considered this "the subliminal seduction of the evaluator." Unconsciously I had dressed in the school uniform colors, and with newspaper reporters, television cameras/ reporters present, I was in the limelight. (I have since made a conscious effort when discussing this study to avoid the colors yellow and blue for fear of being accused of bias. Yet, besides realizing that the school's colors are common and thereby easy to mistakenly put on, I wonder about the extent that we as evaluators/researchers do become subliminally seduced by the work we purport to "objectively" produce.)

Perspectives on Policy and Data Utilization

The educational research literature suggests a varied definition of the term policy. However, as Heslep (1987) indicates, "Policy is a statement setting forth a purpose or course of action for a body of recipients." While the literature indicates that "one's selected definition of policy may effect the nature and outcome of one's policy analysis" (Guba, 1984), there seems to be a practical understanding that there are prescribed stages in the policy making process (Gray, 1984).

Miller (1981) posits that when one examines the role of policymakers and the process of policymaking, one realizes that there is no clear roadmap in this area. According to Holdaway (1983):

> Major changes in educational policies mainly result from socio-economic-political forces and personal values. These changes are occasionally associated with the findings and recommendations of enquiry. They seldom result from individual research activities...

> The research-policy relationship is complex, and, although linkages are difficult to trace, research seems to contribute more to policy-making than is commonly assumed (p. 14).

The issue raised in this study is not a school uniform, i.e., dress code policy; instead, this research effort seeks to understand the factors associated with data utilization and policy development. Cousins and Leithwood (1986) provide insight into this discussion as a result of a review of 65 evaluation studies which were published in the past 15 years. They conclude that evaluation use seemed to be most evident when:

- evaluations were appropriate in approach, methodological sophistication, and intensity;
- the decisions to be made were significant to users and of a sort considered appropriate for the application of formally collected data;
- evaluation findings were consistent with the beliefs and expectations of the users;
- users were involved in the evaluation process and had a prior commitment to the benefits of evaluation;
- users considered the data reported in the evaluation to be relevant to their problems;
- a minimum amount of information from other sources conflicted with the results of the evaluation.

(p. 360)

An equally compelling theoretical perspective on evaluation use and policy formulation is suggested by Rada (1988) and Thompson (1976). Rada focuses on public choice theory and states that "assumptions made about the motivation and behavior of individual school board members, superintendents, and voters" allows us to understand the policymaking process (p. 234).

Thompson indicates that situational factors, and a community policymaking model associated with politics, economics and the social development of the community clarifies our need to understand policymaking (p. 32).

Perhaps most applicable to this study is Weiss' (1987) perspective: "As evaluators we undertake our studies with the intention of helping decision makers make wise decisions... We are often disappointed" (p. 5).

Weiss goes on to focus on the "mind frames" of both researchers/ evaluators and policymakers. According to Shavelson (1988), "by understanding the cognitive nature of our own and others' decisions, we begin to see how institutions and their cultures shape the way... problems are formulated, and acquire and recall information pertinent to problems, and acts" (p. 10).

Yet, "getting into" our own minds and realizing our deep motivations is not easily done. To attempt a similar complex intellectual maneuver with a policymaking body would be a monumental task which may provide theoretical insights - at best.

Lutz (1988) illustrates the need to understand that policy often develops around the interplay between "public wants v.s. public needs." In the case of the school uniform policy issue, it appears that the research and evaluation data were used to rationalize and justify a decision based on "public wants." The policy did not impact on the school district's finances, and it provided the district with positive publicity.

As a result of the media-print and visual news reporting, it appears that positive public perception of the policy significantly influenced the use of the data to justify the decision to sanction a districtwide policy. This latter issue, positive public perception is of particular interest because when integrated with the factors of policymakers' "mind frames", and responding to the "public's wants", one is able to gain insight into how research and evaluation data are used. Further, the media's impact on the policymaking process emerges as a critical factor. Weiss (1987) and Kirst (1987) have indicated that the "mass media" have an equally important influence on policymakers.

In summary, the case of the school uniforms policy formulation process suggests four relevant interrelated factors concerning data utilization: (1.) policymakers' mind frames; (2.) the public's wants over needs; (3.) positive public perception of the policy; and, (4.) mass media's impact.

Implications

Critical to understanding how the aforementioned factors are associated with policymaking and data usage is the recognition of the media as a double-edged sword. The media can be used (manipulated) and made to present positive perspectives on education. Similarly, the mass media with its journalists and reporters, who oftentimes lack familiarity with educational research data, shapes public opinion. At times the media projects education in a negative, sensationalized fashion

without adequate regard for the research and evaluation results that caution against quick and easy explanations. Yet, policymakers are influenced by the lights, cameras, and reporters who want a story. As a result, the prospects of policy based on public wants over public needs becomes a reality with educational research and evaluation data used as a means for justification. In the case of the school uniform policy, the evaluation data were used as a justification to establish districtwide guidelines to address the public's wants.

However, as Lutz (1988) points out, "policy based on public wants (instead of public needs) often changes things symbolically but seldom changes things structurally" (p. 127). Thus, in both a figurative and literal sense, the establishment of a dress code policy illustrates a cosmetic development instead of an instructionally effective policy.

Conclusion

Individuals working in organizations such as public schools have been labeled "research bureaucrats and practitioners" (Shavelson, 1988). I believe a more applicable term derives from Merton (1949) in which he discusses the "bureaucratic and unattached intellectual." The term intellectual is loosely defined as "persons who devote themselves to cultivating and formulating knowledge" (p. 209).

As a self-described "unattached bureaucratic intellectual," I have spent more than 10 years attempting to get a "deserved" salary increase, position upgrade and promotion. Consistently I have been told by superintendents, associate superintendents, and executive directors, "You know how it is, the bureaucracy moves slowly. They take time dealing with things... They... They..."

Out of both confusion and anger, I have had to terminate my discussions and make the following retort, "We speak of the bureaucracy, and we say, 'They this... They that'; as if the bureaucracy is some organic-living person. In fact, we are they. We are the bureaucracy."

The metaphor of a slow-moving bureaucracy suggests that it has a life of its own. While we must acknowledge that bureaucracies do induce an unconscious level of conformity, and at times bureaucracies seem to have routines and a culture all their own that suggest a live entity, we - human beings are the bureaucracy. Additionally, bureaucracies are not inherently all bad - though it may be hard to convince someone who has spent ten years trying to get a promotion that it - the bureaucracy, is fair in addressing legitimate needs and/or complaints.

Yet, just as the bureaucracy is us, so too are policymakers. We are all "potential" policymakers who regardless of our present work station may eventually be in the policy seat(s). At present, it is abundantly clear that the appropriate utilization of educational research and evaluation data is a promise unfulfilled. The so-called "educational reform fads" (Guthrie, 1990), and the repetitious occurrence of school

effectiveness/school improvement initiatives are the result of our failure to adequately utilize and understand evaluation and research data.

As each one of us is provided an opportunity to enter the policy arena, we must seize the initiative to appropriately utilize data to address the "public's needs". To paraphrase the organizational theorist/practitioner Bennis (1985), "We must move beyond doing things right, according to bureaucratic routines and constructs, to doing the right things" to improve education for all.

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